

Schools want to choose their own lunch menus

By McClatchy Washington Bureau, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.09.15

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In this Sept. 11, 2012 photo, students are given healthy choices on a lunch line at Draper Middle School in Rotterdam, New York. After just one year, some schools across the nation are dropping out of what was touted as a healthier federal lunch program, complaining that so many students refused the meals that their cafeterias were losing money. Photo: AP Photo/Hans Pennink

Brad Kramer looks in the lunchroom trash cans and gets upset. They are full of fruits and vegetables. "We have some of the healthiest trash cans in the nation," he says.

Kramer is in charge of a school district's food services in Kansas City, Missouri. He isn't just frustrated about students wasting food. He is also frustrated about the laws that tell him what to serve.

Following the rules takes a lot of time and money. Kramer wants Congress to change them. He says he wants to serve healthy food, but it only helps if the students will actually eat it.

What To Do With The Rules?

Ronda McCullick feels the same way. She is in charge of another school district's food services in Kansas City. She wants to be allowed to make decisions for the schools in her district.

McCullick and Kramer belong to the School Nutrition Association. Their group represents school cafeteria workers and people who supply food to schools.

About 1,000 members of the group went to Washington, D.C., this week. They asked lawmakers to change the rules about school lunches. They want the laws to be easier to follow.

The fight over school meals started in 2010. That is when the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act was passed. It's almost time to take another vote to decide whether to keep the law in place.

Different Schools, Different Lunches

Senator Pat Roberts is a Republican from Kansas. He spoke to the group's members at the end of their trip to Washington, D.C. Roberts said government programs should work for the people, not the other way around.

Roberts recently took over the Senate Agriculture Committee. That means he is responsible for the school lunch program. Now, helping school districts is more important to him than ever before.

Roberts has been visiting lots of schools to try their lunches. He has also been talking to students, teachers, cafeteria workers and principals. He wants to learn more about the problems they are having.

Roberts says he has learned that the schools are very different. He says it will not work to try to make them all do everything the same way.

Some Say The Rules Are Working Fine

First Lady Michelle Obama does not agree with Roberts. The rules he is trying to change are part of her "Let's Move" program. Let's Move is all about helping children stay healthy.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is in charge of farming and food. It says the new rules are working. It says a new study from the University of Connecticut is proof. The study shows that children have been making healthier choices at school and tossing out less food since the new law started.

The study found that more students added fruit to their lunch trays last year. They ate more vegetables, too. They even did a better job cleaning their plates.

Tom Vilsack is the U.S. Agriculture Secretary. He says it is important to remember that the new rules came from doctors. He does not think Congress knows as much about what is healthy as the doctors do.

Roberts said he knows that everyone has strong feelings about the school lunch issue and sometimes things can get out of hand. "We don't need that," Roberts said. "We need solutions."